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Review of The Ethics of Species: An Introduction by Ronald L. Sandler

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■ Book Review

Ronald L. Sandler, *The Ethics of Species: An Introduction*. Cambridge University Press, 2012. 245 pages.

Ronald L. Sandler's *The Ethics of Species: An Introduction* is an ambitious applied ethics book that purports to develop an *ethics of species*, roughly an assessment of the moral relevance of species. In doing so, Sandler sets his eyes on two unrelated topics—the problem of conservation of species in the wake of global climate change, and questions regarding the use of new and emerging technologies to develop new kinds of species, including human enhancement. Sandler overpromises, delivering neither a comprehensive ethics of species, nor an introduction to the topic.

The book is generally well written, and the reader will always have a good idea of what Sandler takes himself to be doing in each chapter. Rather than a comprehensive introduction to moral questions surrounding the value of species as the name and summary would have you believe, the book is comprised, roughly, of three sections. The first two chapters can be described as doing work in metabiology and metaethics. The next three chapters are concerned with a very narrow topic—what stance conservationists should take with regard to conserving species in the wake of global climate change. The last three chapters before the book's conclusion tackle a radically different topic—whether or not it is morally acceptable to create new artificial species and new human species through human enhancement.

Although Sandler promises to offer “an ethics of species”, in the first chapter Sandler readily admits there is no consensus regarding the meaning of terms like “species” and “biodiversity.” Unfortunately Sandler never offers a definitive account of what these terms mean—problematic if his goal is to offer an ethics of “species”; rather at times he will treat the terms as meaning what various professionals mean by them, such as in chapter 3 where these terms are used, roughly, as the conservation biologist would use them. In contrast, the second chapter offers a clear account of the ethical terms he uses throughout the book, defining two kinds of value. The first is instrumental value—or value as a means to an end. The second is intrinsic value, of which there are two kinds—subjective intrinsic value, which is roughly the value that a keepsake might have to an individual, and objective intrinsic value, which is the value things have in and of themselves.

The second chapter purports to examine what kinds of value species and biodiversity have, contending that biodiversity and species value is generally instrumental value. He concludes that many species do not have substantial instrumental value, and thus preservation of species is, largely, unnecessary (this conclusion determines his stance in the next three chapters). Sandler's discussion of alternative theories of species value is sparse—he discusses two theories regarding the objective value of species, then bizarrely discusses a theory about the objective value of individual members of a species. More problematic, Sandler seems oblivious to the fact that biologists readily admit that they have a fallible and relatively shallow understanding of environmental biology, as such, much of the instrumental value of species (at least in preserving the environment as we like it) may very well be hidden value.

In later chapters, he advocates allowing the extinction of many species and allowing ecosystems to adapt to new climates and other artificial influences. It is true that ecosystems will often adapt over time, but this adaptation takes place over long periods of time -- it may take decades or centuries to recover from our carelessly allowing even one species to become extinct.

In chapters three through five Sandler tackles the problem of preservation of species given global climate change. Contemporary conservation strategies rely upon segregating a portion of nature from human interference, but global climate change cannot be segregated against, and thus contemporary conservation strategies will fail to preserve species. Sandler, having argued that biodiversity is largely morally insignificant, advocates that conservationists revise their goals and allow many species to become extinct. The problem with this position is that global climate change is *uncontroversially* harmful to moral agents like us *independent* of the fact that it will cause mass extinctions. Advocating alternative conservationist strategies is a lot like advocating alternative firefighting strategies after the firefighters help arsonists to replace the town's water supply with gasoline, and sat back as they started lighting fires. The most efficient firefighting strategy is to prevent the arsonists from replacing the water supply with gas, and the most efficient conservationist strategy is to take steps to stop climate change. If climate change is left unchecked, droughts will cause massive crop failures which will result in the deaths of millions of people across the world, and we have a strong moral obligation to stop that regardless of whether we have a strong moral obligation to preserve biodiversity.

In chapters six through eight, Sandler claims to morally evaluate contemporary topics in bioengineering, including the creation of new species and a post-human species brought about by human enhancement. Problematically, Sandler takes the position that there are no good arguments for or against many of the positions discussed in the latter half of the book, and thus the topic is somehow extra-moral, or outside the realm of ethics. However, ethics is the branch of philosophy that attempts to answer the question, "What should I do?," and as such there can be no situation where something is neither morally acceptable or morally unacceptable; the idea that something is neither morally acceptable nor unacceptable is incoherent.

By arguing that species creation and human enhancement are somehow amoral, in a sense Sandler argues that it doesn't matter whether we engage in creating artificial species; but surely this is a mistake. There are potential risks and rewards to creating new kinds of life, just as there are potential risks and rewards for letting a species go extinct. It is for these reasons that we need a comprehensive theory of ethics of species—a means to evaluate whether these risks are worth taking. Sandler does not provide this, and thus he fails to provide an ethics of species.

*William Simkulet